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Thompson, William P.

The three bases of
morality

London

1916

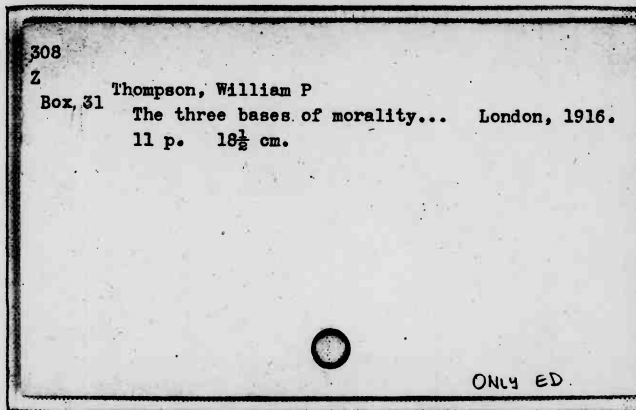
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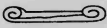
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THE
THREE BASES OF MORALITY



BY

WILLIAM P. THOMPSON,
BIRKENHEAD.



LONDON:
THE PEACE SOCIETY, 47, NEW BROAD STREET, E.C.
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THE

THREE BASES OF MORALITY.



THE following essay was written a good number of years ago after reading a little tract of Tolstoi. At the present time I cannot remember how much of this tract may be engrafted into this essay. Tolstoi gave three ideas as the bases of morality; pure selfishness, patriotism, and religion or love of God.

A community of men having their sole basis of morality pure selfishness, and with the idea that things are right and wrong in proportion as they appear to be in accordance with their own interest and happiness or the reverse, would hardly be a lasting community, and no tribe having this as their sole basis of morality could long exist, as each man's interest would be likely to be opposed to the interest of others, and a house divided against itself cannot stand.

The second of Tolstoi's bases of morality was patriotism. Patriotism is love of patria, or one's country, and patria comes from the same root as father, and means the fatherland, and a man was moral or otherwise in the eyes of his fellows according as he served his country well or the reverse. In earliest ages men considered Patriotism was connected only with the region or abode of one's father and his descendants, or was even personal and referred only to the family or tribe, especially with nomadic peoples. In savage races it rarely extends much beyond the family; all others are aliens, having no rights that the family consider themselves bound to respect, until for purposes of defence several families collect together, when mutual interests engender communal feelings. Still, where several

savage families unite for self defence into a sort of community, the tribal feeling is at first small and easily effaced. This was evidently the case with a prehistoric tribe in North Ireland, whose burial mounds were lately opened out. Large numbers of skulls were examined, but every one bore traces of having been broken once or oftener by a blow from a club. Such men are like the slightly gregarious beast of prey, but of such it is impossible to found or keep up a large state.

As men become more civilised they unite into larger communities, tribes and states, and their ideas of morality increase and broaden. Among the Semites and Greeks, and most other heathen nations of antiquity—among all the nobler nations before the advent of Christianity—the highest idea of morality was that a man ought to do the best he could for his community or state, and, if necessary, die in its defence, without any regard for the rights, interests, or happiness of other communities. "My country, right or wrong" was practically their motto. The claims of the community among the Semites were much stronger than they are with us. They were not merely social and political, but religious. Each community had its special God, who was their God and *theirs* only, and in Polytheistic nations like the Greeks and Egyptians it was nearly the same. Each city had at least *one* God whom its citizens looked upon as peculiarly their own, and as a God that cared specially for them. Just as in the dark ages, most towns and communities had each its patron saint, to whom it gave very exclusive veneration, and even specially sacred images of that saint, as for instance "Our Lady of Compostella." When Ruth said to Naomi "Thy people shall be my people," it followed as a matter of course "and thy God shall be my God." She was leaving the people and land of Moab and the god Chemosh, to go into the land of Israel and join its people, and consequently to come under their God Jahveh or Jehovah. Citizenship and religion were intimately connected. In defending their city, they were defending their God. In conquering other lands they were adding to the domain of their God, and destroying the enemies of their deity.

In all the countries, religion and Government were intimately mixed up; the priesthood was a political office and religion an affair of state, and the welfare of the

state was a part of their religion. In old times, therefore, expatriation was a much more terrible thing than it is now, and "an alien and outcast from the commonwealth of Israel" or of other community, was usually in a very bad case. It meant alienation from all rights (human and divine) in the estimation of such nation. The outcast's former countrymen considered it no longer wrong to kill him and to take his property—in fact, considered such an act praiseworthy rather than otherwise. The only thing an outcast could do, was to try to join some other community, as a *freeman* if possible, otherwise as a slave, to save his life. Morality, as understood by them, was compatible with committing the most awful atrocities on other communities. Robbery and murder committed against such were even commendable and praiseworthy if tending to increase the relative power and the wealth of their own community. Among the Greeks and Romans, the idea of moral obligation rarely extended beyond their own city or state government. The Lacedemonians and even the Athenians thought nothing of conquering and enslaving other Greeks of a different community, and the Syracusians still show with pride a quarry where their ancestors 2300 years ago confined 7,000 Athenian prisoners to starve to death. The devout Kings of Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Egypt, engraved on the walls of their temples long accounts of how they had invaded the territory of other nations, with whom they had no cause of quarrel, and had burnt and laid waste their cities, enslaved or exterminated the inhabitants, and divided their lands among their own people. They evidently considered (and doubtless so did their subjects) that such conduct was saintly, and to be admired. They felt they were obeying the dictates of their religion (just as Samuel ordered the most atrocious and unprovoked cold-blooded massacre of the Amalekites, men, women and children and even the cattle as the command of his God, on the excuse that the ancestors of these Amalekites had carried on a guerilla war with Israel when the latter invaded their country, about 500 years before). We could with equal justice set to work to exterminate the Spaniards, for, sending out the Spanish Armada in 1558, as their countermove against the numerous bands of pirates and privateers fitted out in English ports to devastate the shipping and the settlements of the Spanish Main.

Even the great Mogol conqueror, who marked his course

through Asia by the smoke of burning cities and of desolated lands, and whose resting places were ornamented by pyramids of human heads (a deliberate toll levied on the inhabitants to keep down inimical population) was a saint and a hero in his own eyes, and in those of his countrymen; for his actions were consistent with morality as understood by them. He gained a mighty empire for his own community. His victims were outside his nation and the guardianship of his god. While by decimating the men of the conquered countries to make these pyramids of heads, he was lessening the number of potential enemies of his nation, and increasing the domains of his community and of his community's God. Caesar, in his "Commentaries," shows a similar disregard for the rights, the lives, and liberties of all peoples outside the Roman dominions, and considered his massacres of foreigners highly laudatory, and his people thought so too, and honoured him for it. Macaulay well illustrated this morality in the words he puts into the mouth of an old Roman:—

"Then none were for a party, but all were for the State,
And the great man helped the poor, and the poor man
loved the great;
The lands were fairly portioned and the spoils were
fairly sold,
And the Romans lived like brothers, in the brave days
of old."

The lands that were fairly portioned and the spoils sold being those captured from the surrounding peoples.

The aim and great ideal of all these ancient nations seems to have been to aggrandise their community at the expense of others. They were never satisfied. Alexander sighed for new worlds to conquer. The old Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian kings spent all their energies in extending their empires, and the same with all their neighbours. They ground down their subjects (and their tributary or conquered realms still more) with heavy taxes and conscription, until their subjects were nearly worn out. Even in more enlightened Christian times, this has been very much the case. It has been said on good statistical authority that the average height of the Italians was lowered two inches in the Napoleonic wars and the almost incessant wars in Italy during the previous century, mainly through the physical flower of the race having so

largely perished in the wars, or been kept in celibacy for military and sacerdotal purposes.

It was the same way with the old Hebrews. Some of the most awful atrocities the world has ever seen were perpetrated by them, under the orders of their kings and prophets, and ostensibly at the command of their God, upon kindred or Abrahamic peoples, such as the Midianites and Moabites, and surrounding nations with very similar language and institutions; and when one of their own tribes, Benjamin, was outlawed, they nearly exterminated this tribe too. Christian nations, encouraged by these examples, have acted almost as badly, to each other in many cases, and to non-Christian nations still more—instance the Spaniards in the New World. The famous papal bull which gave out that "faith need not be kept with heretics" was all in a piece, and in accordance with, this antique morality. But how does this work out? The constant exercise of brute force, rather than justice, to surrounding nations, reacts on the conquering nation itself, and the moral ideas of both government and people are lowered. Arming goes on apace, greater and greater sums are spent on defence and offence, conscription becomes more and more devouring, until the whole available resources of a country are spent in militarism. At length the tension becomes unbearable, the subject nations take advantage of an accidental weakness in the imperial community to rebel; the imperial people, worn out by military exactions, do not respond to the call of their government, and the whole edifice irretrievably falls. This has been the fate of nearly all military empires. At present, this form of morality (exemplified in the infamous motto "My country, right or wrong") is the one largely ruling in this realm, and in nearly all the civilised world. Constantly increasing taxes and conscription, intense greed for empire, and callous indifference to the rights and freedom of other nations are rampant; and whither will it tend? The Churches as a rule look on with indifference or approval. Those by law appointed in most countries consecrate the banners, and when there is a war, offer up official prayers for victory for their side, just as the Pontifex Maximus did in Ancient Pagan Rome.

How rarely our newspapers and public men discuss the justice of any given war we enter into; or why we should pour out gold like water over the fortifications of Malta

and Gibraltar (fortresses kept only for offensive purposes) or in keeping a fleet stronger than those of any other two powers combined. In the war with the so-called Mad Mullah in Somaliland, which was concluded by a treaty with this very man, who among our public men or newspapers inquired into the rights and wrongs of the dispute? or why we were there at all? The outcry was all on the useless expense entailed in attacking an agile nomad in a desert! When is this Imperialism going to stop? and how? This pagan morality is a ghastly failure. It began in individual greed and selfishness: it is but national greed and selfishness now, egged on by an international ring of armament firms and financiers. What is there to put in its place? The reply is, the higher or *Christian Patriotism*! Let us go back to first principles, and to the very derivation of the word patriotism, and say with the poet—

"Where is the true man's fatherland?
Is it where he, perchance, is born?
Doth not the yearning spirit scorn
In such scant borders to be spanned?
Oh yes! his fatherland must be
As the blue heaven, wide and free:

"Where'er a single slave doth pine,
Where'er one man may help another.
Thank God for such a birthright, brother!
That spot of earth is thine and mine:
There is the true man's country grand!
There is a world-wide fatherland!"

Christian patriotism is the love of this "patria," and the being the avowed subject of, and serving, not the god of one little tribe or country, but the Almighty Father, the God of the whole earth and universe; a patriotism like that of Joseph Sturge's, of whom it was said he had

"A love outreaching unto all God's creatures,
With sturdy hate of wrong."

This Christian patriotism or cosmopolitanism—a love reaching unto all God's creatures, as God's creatures, love of the Father's land, is yet only just beginning to be accepted by mankind. And yet it is the only real philosophic and scientific one. A man being a member of God's creation

ought naturally to consider that the reason of his existence is to do His will and to do his best to extend His Kingdom. We are in a universe governed absolutely by the laws of an omniscient, all powerful, just, and benevolent Being. We are here mere motes as it were in eternal space. Our lives here are as it were mere fleeting breaths in the eternity of past and future times. Our intellects and powers are utterly finite compared to His. We all admit His benevolence: Why then not submit to His rule and be citizens of His Kingdom rather than of an earthly one? We are governed absolutely (except for the freedom of thought and action God gives us) by His eternal laws. We find that everything else exists for a useful purpose, in carrying out the designs of the Almighty: Why then not we also? Everyone of us has learned that in exact proportion as we live in accordance with His physical laws, so are we healthy and (*ceteris paribus*) happy. The infraction of His physical laws is disastrous. Does it not then follow that our main purpose should be to live in accordance with His spiritual and moral laws, that His kingdom should be our fatherland, and His creatures our fellow subjects and countrymen? But the living in accordance with His spiritual laws necessitates the knowledge of those laws and the obtaining of that knowledge first hand by communion with Him. The uniform experience of saints in all ages and all times and in all religions has been that those who give themselves up unreservedly to Him, with a pure mind or heart, and ask and seek to be guided by His spirit, find that they can and do commune with Him. That this communion becomes clearer and stronger as time goes on, and though it does not teach them philosophy, or even what is generally called theology, it does teach them sufficiently to make them good citizens of this world-patria, and give them a satisfaction spiritually that nothing else can give. It has indeed been the universal experience of mankind, that those saintly souls who have given themselves up entirely to His guidance have had their patriotism widened out into a love "out-reaching unto all God's creatures, with sturdy hate of wrong."

Let us judge this highest morality by its fruits. It is generally admitted that those who do live up to this ideal are better citizens of the world than those who follow only the lower narrow patriotism; that, if all men would be of this mind, the world would be a vastly better place of

abode than it is now; that if nations did so, war would cease and a great amount of misery and destitution would be obviated. Take for instance two splendid examples respectively of these two types of patriotism in the same country, Daniel Boone, the founder of Kentucky, and William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania. Each of them was an honourable brave man and a patriot according to his lights, but their lights differed. William Penn looked upon the Indians as his fellow creatures, and though he, like the founders of Kentucky at a later date, had obtained a grant of the country from the King of England, he acknowledged the natives as the rightful owners of the land. He announced his intention of colonising the country on Christian principles, and of ruling in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. He would have neither soldiers, nor militia, arsenals, nor forts. When this became known the whole of Europe rang with ridicule against the "crack brained enthusiast" who was deliberately going to "put his head under the scarping knives of the Lenni Lenapi and the Mohawks," the latter at that time considered the most bloodthirsty of all the Indian tribes. But Penn thought differently. On the shores of the Delaware was a deep nearly conical limestone sink, in which the stone had broken away in steps from the top right down to the broad circular bottom which was composed of the rich earth brought down by the river. For ages this had been the sacred palaver or council place of the Lenni Lenapi. Penn, who was well known to the Indians for his righteous rule in New Jersey, called a meeting of the Chiefs of all the Indian tribes for hundreds of miles round to assemble here. They came, and to the meeting came also representatives of the Iroquois, including a deputation of Mohawks of New York State, and one from the Tuscaroras of Carolina. He told them how they were all children of one Father, that he and his friends believed in doing as they would be done by, that they recognised the Indians' rights, and would never deprive them of their land without their consent. That in all cases of dispute between Indians and whites a mixed jury of six Indians and six whites, and an Indian and an English judge sitting together, should decide, and he then and there made a treaty of friendship with them which was "to last as long as the rivers ran and the grass grew." It did in fact continue for seventy-two years, during the whole of which there were no soldiers

or militia in the Colony, no white man was injured by an Indian, and only one Indian murdered by a white, and when this peaceful state of things came to an end, it was not through the Friends or the Indians, but through the British Government, who in 1753 ended the Quaker regime, and forced upon the colony an army and militia to defend it, with the result that the next year the French invaded the country, and brought fire and sword to within fifteen miles of Philadelphia. But as far as the Pennsylvanians, the Quakers, and the Indians were concerned, the treaty remained intact, and merited the remark of Voltaire: "It was the only treaty never ratified by an oath, and the only treaty never broken." William Penn indeed and his successors found the truth of the saying, "When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." Serving God indeed involves loving and doing good to our fellow men. It was one of the sayings of William Penn: "A man should make the good government of his country a part of his religion."

Boone, on the other hand, looked upon the native Indians as so much vermin. He held that "the way to civilise them was to civilise them off the face of the earth," and notwithstanding that he had seen the result of Penn's "grand experiment" in its entirety (for the settlement of Kentucky began in 1769 shortly after the Quaker rule in Pennsylvania ended) he waged relentless war against the red men. For about twenty-three years that war continued. Several times nearly every settlement of the whites was destroyed, but in the end numbers prevailed, and the Indians of Kentucky were exterminated. So frightful, however, were the atrocities on both sides, that the popular name for Kentucky was "The dark and bloody land"; and it and Tennessee, which was then a part of it, have remained ever since morally the darkest land in the United States.

It is very commonly said by patriots of the lower type, that a war once in a while is advantageous, and good for trade, but I never yet met one who would apply this to Civil War. "Of course a civil war is awful," they say, "and no moral individual would look upon it as anything but a consummate evil." To a cosmopolitan, to a man of the wider Christian morality, every war is a civil war, and evil. An ordinary patriot resents a wrong done to his

country as done to himself, but the Cosmopolitan goes further. Lowell wisely said :—

"We owe allegiance to the State: but deeper, truer,
more
To the sympathies that God hath set within our spirit's
core.
Our country demands our fealty; we grant it so, but
then
Before Man made us citizens, Great Nature made us
Men.
He's true to God who's true to man; wherever wrong
be done
To the humblest and the weakest 'neath the all-
beholding sun,
That wrong is also done to *us*, and they are slaves
most base
Whose love of right is for themselves, and not for all
their race."

TO SUM UP.—The old Pagan or military patriotism looked on all other states as its potential or actual enemies, and strove to aggrandise the country at the expense of surrounding peoples. All the resources of the country were devoted to this end. It reacted on individuals, and each citizen in his turn strove mainly to aggrandise himself and his family regardless of the interests, feelings and rights of others. There was usually very little or no public spirit in these great military empires except such as tended to advance the military power of the state.

Christian patriotism looks on surrounding States as fellow members of the great family of God and strives to benefit one's own state and all other states by the arts of Peace, by improving the laws, by the putting down of social evils, by the conquest over the forces of nature, and the increase and education and civilization and the comfort and happiness, of mankind. A Christian patriot in England at the present time* in considering what are the potential enemies of our country would not pick out Russia or Germany, but the drink traffic, militarism, the gambling mania, bad land laws, class legislation, insanitation, the spread of heartless luxury and competition, and callousness to the wrongs of others.

* Written long before the present war.

He would strive to lessen the enmity of other countries by courtesy, rather than by frightening them with a display of force.

During the late Boer War, which even patriots of the old type are beginning to condemn as needless, and which brought untold loss to this country, without any return, the poet Watson wrote these splendid verses, so typical of the aims of Christian Patriotism :—

"Here, while the tide of conquest rolls
Against the distant golden shore
The starved and stunted human souls
Are with us, more and more.

Vain are your science, vain your art,
Your triumphs and your glories vain,
To feed the hunger of their heart
The famine of their brain.

Your savage deserts howling near
Your wastes of squalor, vice and shame:
Is there no room for victories here,
No fields for deeds of fame?

Arise and conquer, while you can,
The foe that in your midst resides,
And build within the mind of man
The empire that abides."

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